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ABSTRACT

This research brief discusses how to integrate service learning into institutional culture, climate, and expectations so that it can be sustained. According to studies in the 1990s, the use of service learning in community colleges increased almost 50% in just a few years. While the number of these programs has grown significantly, not all are sustained by colleges for the long term. Another survey in the year 2000 garnered information about the level of institutionalization of grantee programs at 126 community colleges. More than 70% responded, and this brief illustrates the percentage of affirmative answers according to Curry's (1991) three conditions of institutionalization--structural, procedural, and cultural integration. Responses revealed that: (1) the involvement of the chief executive officer, chief academic officer, and faculty leaders was important in institutionalizing programs; and (2) faculty support and involvement in providing education and training about service learning as well as the support of this strategy as a pedagogical tool, had significant influence on the program's endurance. In general, any program that has the support of only administrators or only faculty will not be institutionalized as easily as programs that have the support of both. This brief also discusses funding for programs and strategies for long-term sustainability, including evaluating the program annually, distributing publicity materials often, and holding recognition events each year. (Contains 31 references/resources and 9 figures.) (EMH)

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Institutionalizing Service Learning in Community Colleges AACC Research Brief

Mary Prentice

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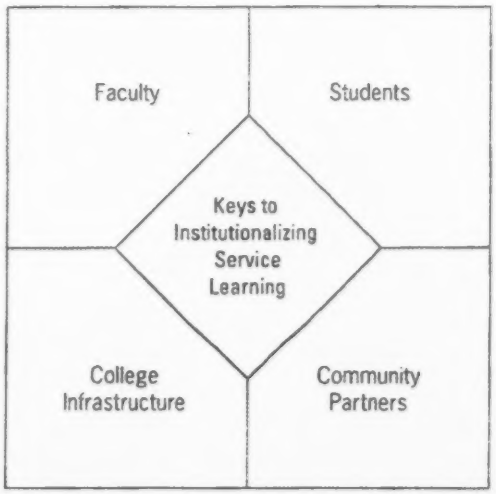
RESEARCH BRIEF

Institutionalizing Service Learning in Community Colleges

by Mary Prentice

College administrators and faculty who view the future as learning-focused are searching for ideas, practices, and programs that can be created or adopted to open up new pathways to learning. Increasingly, ideas focus on experiential education as one method to enhance the relevance and understanding of students being taught within a traditional instructional format. To meet the needs of all learners, instructional innovations should be continually integrated into the classroom. Many new experiential approaches are being introduced, and one of the more prevalent and effective approaches is the use of service learning as a teaching and learning tool.

Service learning combines community service with academic instruction, focusing on critical, reflective thinking and personal and civic responsibility. The use of service learning in the classroom is becoming increasingly widespread. In 1995 the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) surveyed community colleges nationwide to gather information about their involvement with and interest in service learning. The results showed that, while 71 percent of community colleges reported that service was part of their institutional mission, only 31 percent were using service learning at the time.



Results of a 1997 follow-up study, as well as anecdotal information gathered by AACC through 2000, indicated that nearly half of all community colleges were using service learning in their classrooms. The reported use of service learning in community colleges had increased almost 50 percent in just a few years.

While the number of service learning programs has grown significantly, not all of those programs are sustained by colleges for the long term. How do community colleges successfully integrate service learning into institutional culture, climate, and expectations so that it can be sustained?

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Institutionalization

In 1994 and again in 1997, AACC selected groups of institutions—known as *Horizons* colleges—to work together in collaborative mentoring relationships to build campus-based service learning programs. Grant funds for these three-year initiatives were provided by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS); amounts ranged from $3,500 to $12,000 annually. College faculty and administrators were expected to integrate service learning into curricula and create mutually beneficial partnerships with community-based organizations.

One key goal for the *Horizons* colleges was a focus on sustainability for their growing service learning programs. After their grants ended, would the colleges sustain these programs on their own?

In an effort to gauge the level of institutionalization of its grantee programs, AACC developed and distributed a survey in 2000 to the 26 *Horizons* colleges that had completed their funding cycles; 77 percent of those program directors responded. In addition, the survey was sent to 100 other community colleges ("non-*Horizons* colleges") that already offered service learning; 70 percent of these colleges responded.

The survey questions were grouped around four institutionalization issues: infrastructure, faculty, students, and community partnerships. For analytical purposes, specific survey questions from each of the four issue areas were chosen to compare to Curry's (1991) model of institutionalization. The objective of the survey was to identify the particular institutionalization factors utilized by service learning programs across the country. This was done through the use of Curry's research on the conditions necessary for the institutionalization of a project or program to take place.

According to Curry, three conditions are necessary for institutionalization to occur:

Condition One: **Structural Integration**—support for the innovation must be reflected in multiple, concrete ways throughout the organization, and the innovation must be integrated with other structures in the organization;

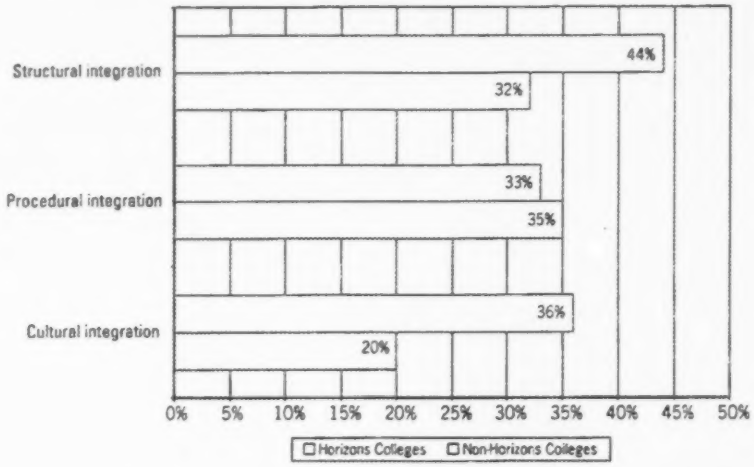
Condition Two: **Procedural Integration**—activities associated with the innovation must become standard operating procedure, thus losing the status as a special project; and

Condition Three: **Cultural Integration**—the norms and values associated with the innovation must be embraced by members of the organization.

Questions that reflected each of Curry's conditions were selected from the survey for further examination. Responses to these survey items were analyzed to determine the degree to which colleges had achieved the institutionalization conditions that Curry described.

Curry's structural integration condition included aspects such as whether the innovation (i.e., service learning) was incorporated into the short- and long-range plans of the college, and whether a budget existed for the program. Curry's procedural integration condition included aspects that would reflect whether the innovation had become part of the

FIGURE 1 **Average Percentage of Affirmative Responses by Institutionalization Condition**



operating procedures of the college, such as including in the college catalog a notation or description of courses offering service learning. Finally, Curry's cultural integration condition involved the level of participation of college faculty, staff, and administrators, such as offering service learning training as part of faculty development activities.

Average percentages of affirmative responses were calculated on the three conditions for both *Horizons* and non-*Horizons* colleges (see Figure 1). Comparison of the two cohorts shows that *Horizons* colleges scored higher than non-*Horizons* colleges on Curry's structural and cultural integration, while scoring slightly lower on procedural integration. The two-percent difference between the procedural integration scores is so slight statistically that the two groups of colleges can be treated as if they had the same score on this condition.

It is interesting that the *Horizons* colleges scored almost twice as high on cultural integration as the non-*Horizons* colleges. Traditionally, influencing the culture of a college is one of the hardest accomplishments that new programs can achieve. Yet *Horizons* colleges reported that the support, guidance, availability of information and training about best practices, and ongoing mentoring in the AACC project enabled their service learning programs to become more culturally institutionalized than if they had not been part of a project structured like AACC's.

The specifics of why the *Horizons* colleges may have scored differently than the non-*Horizons* colleges may become more apparent when individual questions from each of the three conditions are compared. Figures 2, 3, and 4 present such comparisons by showing the percentage of affirmative responses for questions included in each of Curry's three conditions of institutionalization.

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FIGURE 2 **Percentage of Affirmative Responses to Selected Structural Integration Items**

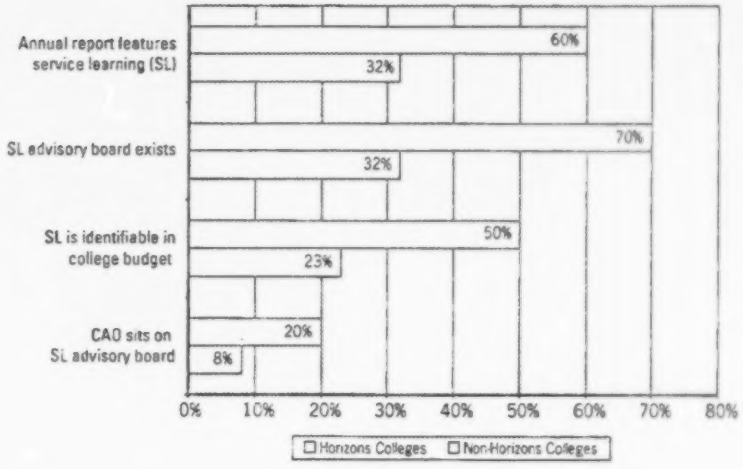


FIGURE 3 **Percentage of Affirmative Responses to Selected Procedural Integration Items**

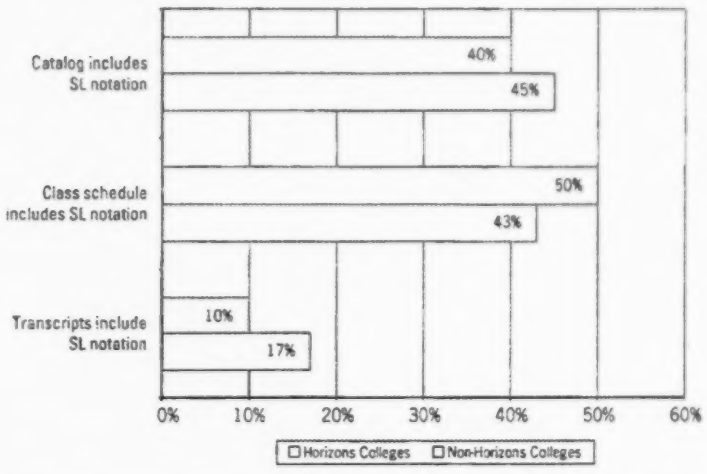
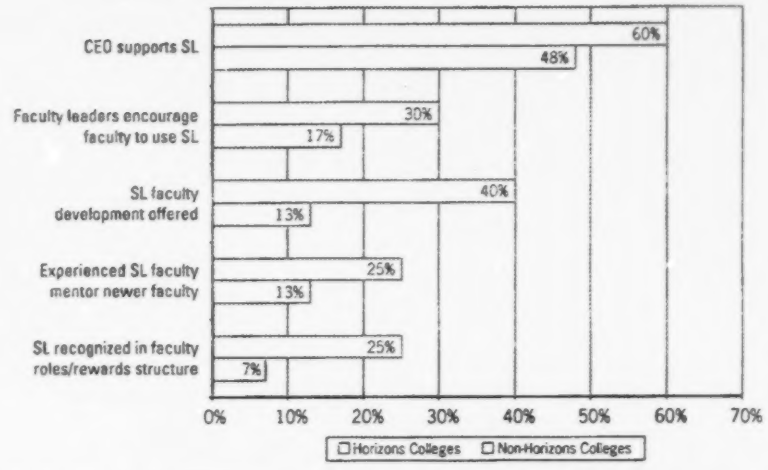


FIGURE 4 **Percentage of Affirmative Responses to Selected Cultural Integration Items**



Administrative and Faculty Involvement

Two themes emerged from the results of the survey. The first focuses on the importance of the involvement of administrative leaders in institutionalizing programs. Survey responses revealed that the chief executive officer (CEO), the chief academic officer (CAO), and faculty leaders from *Horizons* colleges supported and were involved with service learning at a higher rate than those leaders at non-*Horizons* colleges. In some cases, the differences are surprising. For example, the responses revealed that almost three times as many CAOs at *Horizons* colleges sat on service learning advisory committees or boards than did CAOs at non-*Horizons* colleges.

A second theme revealed by this survey concerns faculty support and involvement in providing education and training about service learning, and support of this strategy as a pedagogical tool. This includes the role that faculty development offerings and a college's faculty roles and rewards structure play in helping to institutionalize the program. Three times as many *Horizons* colleges as non-*Horizons* colleges offered faculty development activities related to service learning, and more than three times as many *Horizons* colleges as non-*Horizons* colleges recognized service learning in the colleges' faculty roles and rewards structures. Thus it is not surprising that faculty leaders in *Horizons* colleges were almost twice as likely to encourage the use of service learning as those in non-*Horizons* colleges.

When both themes are considered together, they provide validity to administration and faculty support as necessary to the success of service learning. Any program that only has the support of administrators or only has the support of faculty will not be institutionalized as easily as programs that have the support of both.

Horizons colleges scored higher, on average, on institutionalization progression than did the non-*Horizons* colleges. Some of these differences were due to the CNCS funds that the *Horizons* colleges received. This may be one key explanation for the difference in the response rate to the question concerning whether service learning was identifiable in the college's budget line items—because, in most cases, CNCS funding provided the seed money for *Horizons* colleges to pilot service learning.

Beyond this, however, some differences existed between the two survey cohorts because of the additional, nonmonetary support that *Horizons* colleges received. Not only did AACC provide initial training and support, it followed up with ongoing mentoring, access to resources, regional workshops, on-site campus visits, Internet listservs, and ongoing discussions of institutionalization steps. The *Horizons* colleges formed a collegial group that continues to converse by e-mail and at service learning conferences and community college meetings. Because of these additional benefits, it is therefore not surprising that *Horizons* colleges scored higher on institutionalization progression than did the non-*Horizons* colleges.

Keys to Service Learning Institutionalization

Other indicators of service learning institutionalization were analyzed using the survey. Several of these indicators are considered to be best practices by service learning researchers (Burns, 1998; Robinson and Barnett, 1998; Shumer, 1997). For many colleges, following these practices can lead to institutionalization. Results are displayed in Figures 5 through 8.

FIGURE 5 **Percentage of Affirmative Responses to Selected Service Learning Infrastructure Indicators**

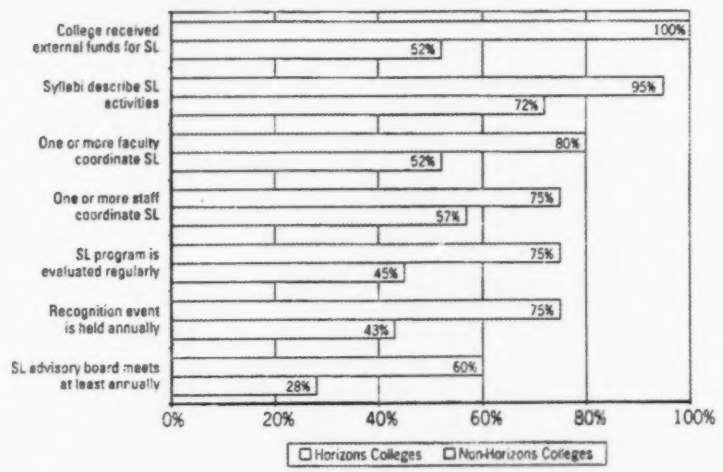


FIGURE 6 **Percentage of Affirmative Responses to Selected Service Learning Faculty Indicators**

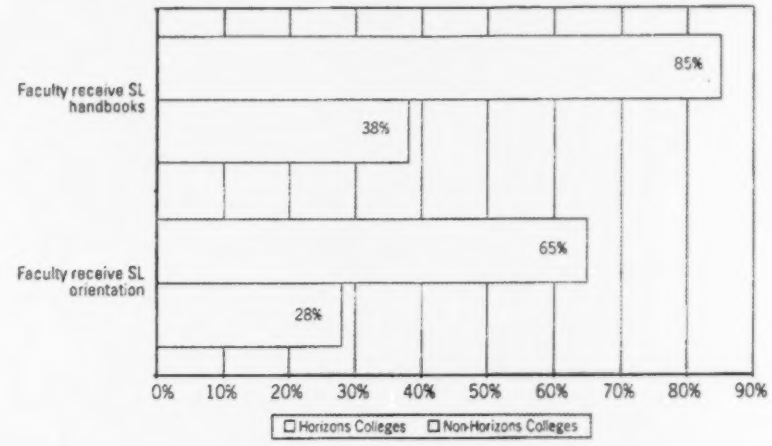


FIGURE 7 **Percentage of Affirmative Responses to Selected Service Learning Student Indicators**

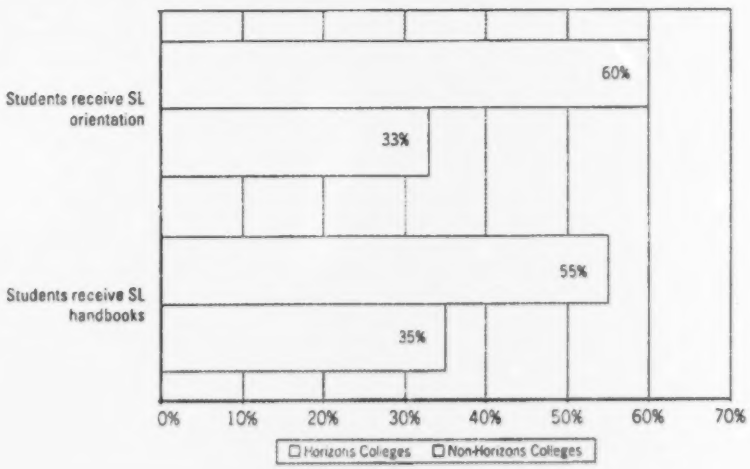
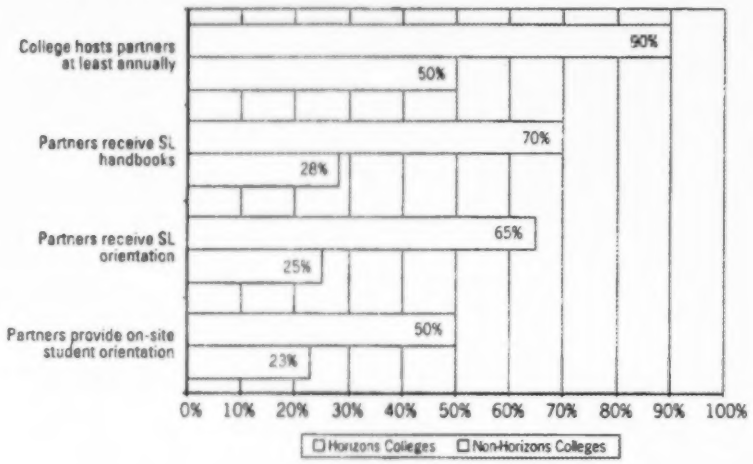


FIGURE 8 **Percentage of Affirmative Responses to Selected Service Learning Community Partnership Indicators**



From these results, it seems clear that *Horizons* service learning program directors followed the best practices suggested by researchers. For example, only 45 percent of non-*Horizons* colleges reported that their service learning programs were evaluated regularly, while 75 percent of *Horizons* colleges indicated that regular assessment occurred. Ninety percent of *Horizons* colleges hosted their community partners at least once a year at advisory board meetings, service fairs, and in one-on-one meetings, nearly twice the rate of non-*Horizons* colleges.

Also noteworthy are the findings that only 43 percent of non-*Horizons* colleges held at least one service learning recognition event each year, while such celebrations occurred in 75 percent of *Horizons* service learning programs. *Horizons* colleges were also doing more in the areas of faculty, student, and community agency training, such as developing handbooks and holding regular orientation sessions. The *Horizons* colleges' tendency to adopt best practices was a likely outcome of their access to information, support, and mentoring in the AACC project.

Funding

Survey responses reflecting the degree of adoption of best practices seemed to parallel those of the degree of institutionalization achieved in community college service learning programs. In both analyses, *Horizons* colleges scored higher overall in the engagement of best practices and in the degree of institutionalization achieved by the service learning programs. One explanation is that programs that receive extra money—even modest amounts—are able to do more and greater things. Certainly, these external funds do have an effect on what can be accomplished in a service learning program.

On closer examination, however, it appears that the activities that make up the best practices of offering service learning to students can be done for very little expense. Training, orientation, and recognition are not necessarily high-cost activities; thus the explanation for the differing response rates between the two cohorts may be the other, nonmonetary benefits provided to the *Horizons* colleges through AACC's service learning initiative.

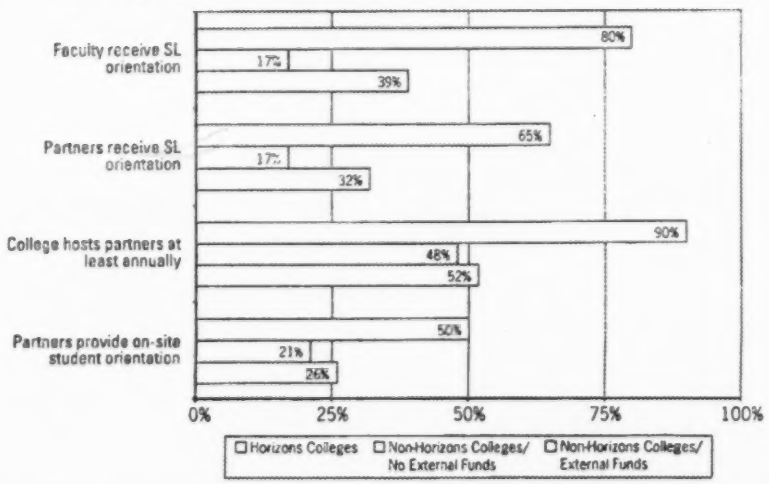
To explore whether external funding in general was the explanation for the differences between *Horizons* and non-*Horizons* colleges, three cohorts from the research sample were compared. One cohort contained the *Horizons* colleges, another consisted of non-*Horizons* colleges that indicated they had received some form of external funding for service learning in the past, and the third cohort reflected non-*Horizons* colleges that reported receiving no external funding.

The comparison revealed that, for a grant initiative to bring about qualitative changes and move programs toward institutionalization, the funder should offer its grantee colleges more than just money. There were four survey questions for which this was especially true, in that the *Horizons* colleges' affirmative response rates were always twice as high as the other two cohorts' response rates. Figure 9 summarizes these results.

The activities reflected in these questions are not activities that require a great deal of money. Orientation for faculty and community partners need cost no more than the paper and printing expenses for service learning information and materials, and time on the part of the organizers. This is also true for the hosting of community partners once a year. There are many ways to make faculty and community partners feel valued and important that do not cost much, such as recognition ceremonies or certificates. This low-cost theme is reflected in the responses to the final survey item shown in Figure 9. Community partners sometimes covered the costs of on-site orientation, and yet partnering with a *Horizons* college seemed to spur the amount of training that agencies provided to service learning students.

It is possible that receiving an AACC service learning grant provided *Horizons* college programs with a variety of resources to draw from in order to improve and enhance service learning; clearly, money was only one of these resources. *Horizons* colleges also had access to ongoing mentoring; information, conferences, and workshops; and help with student, faculty, and agency training needs. While funding for service learning may be helpful, it cannot be regarded as solely sufficient to stimulate the growth and development of a program.

FIGURE 9 **Percentage of Affirmative Responses to Selected Survey Items by Type of Funding**



Conclusion

The fate of community college service learning programs can be more certain now that some of the factors of institutionalization have been identified. In working toward institutionalization, colleges should focus on at least three main areas.

First, efforts should be made continuously to increase the involvement of college administrators (including faculty leaders) in the program. This can range from inviting administrators to a celebration event at the end of each term or offering them the opportunity to attend student reflection sessions, to asking that an administrator make a deeper commitment by agreeing to serve on the service learning advisory board. The results of this research suggest that any and all opportunities to bring administrators into the program will have long-term benefits for service learning.

The second area of focus should be on increasing faculty members' awareness of the program and developing the skills to put service learning to use. Strategies such as offering faculty development activities related to service learning and including service learning participation in the faculty roles and rewards structure also appear to go far in helping to institutionalize the program within a college. Ignoring faculty can be a critical factor leading to the demise of a program. Service learning simply doesn't exist if faculty members don't become involved.

Finally, program directors should focus on incorporating as many best practices as possible to reach service learning institutionalization. Using some of the following strategies will go a long way toward getting the administrative and faculty support that is needed for long-term sustainability:

- design course syllabi to reflect service learning requirements and related course expectations;
- establish a service learning advisory board or committee that meets regularly;
- provide orientation for students, faculty, and community agencies;
- ask community partners to provide their own orientation for service learners;
- evaluate the program annually;
- develop networking relationships with other service learning colleges;
- create and distribute publicity materials often;
- hold recognition events each year; and
- make everyone—from the governing board to support staff—aware of the program.

After all of the research is considered, what at first might have looked like a linear path toward institutionalization turns out instead to be a flowing tapestry that can only be created by continually and simultaneously weaving in best practices, faculty interest, and administrative support—the aspects of structural, procedural, and cultural integration that Curry identified. Each strand is vital to the integrity of the whole program. A service learning program created on a foundation that has neglected any one of these strands is a program for which institutionalization may not become a reality.

To ensure that a strong tapestry is created, it is up to service learning program directors to weave all the strands together into a seamless fabric of support. Although it may appear to be a daunting task, with the help of identified institutionalization factors, service learning faculty and directors can work to achieve the reality of an invigorated experiential approach to learning.

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America's Promise
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